DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 461 042 CE 082 811

AUTHOR	Stevens, Paul
TITLE	Bottom Up Succession Planning Works Better.
INSTITUTION	Centre for Worklife Counselling, Sydney (Australia).
PUB DATE	2001-00-00
NOTE	6p.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.worklife.com.au/resource/sucsn.html.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Education; Career Development; Career Education; *Career Planning; Change Strategies; Developed Nations; Employment Opportunities; *Employment Practices; Foreign Countries; Human Resources; *Management Development; Occupational Aspiration; *Occupational Mobility; Organizational Change; *Personnel Management; *Promotion (Occupational)
IDENTIFIERS	Australia; *Succession Planning

ABSTRACT

Most succession planning practices are based on the premise that ambitious people have and want only one career direction--upwardly mobile. However, employees have 10 career direction options at any stage of their working lives. A minority want the career action requiring promotion. Employers with a comprehensive career planning support program know this. Knowing the direction in which a good performing employee is inclined is critical to achieving succession planning as a workable human resource practice. By stimulating employees to submit short- and long-term goals in Career Action Step Proposals, management has a better idea of who wants what. Career self-resilience education ensures that employees assemble data about themselves and can learn career management skills through workshops, print resources or software. Once they increase their employability confidence and personal career management expertise, they are less apprehensive about future organizational change. Succession planning resembles a grid-like pattern; possible successors can be plotted for job content moves upwards, sideways, or downwards. A designated successor benefits from a learning journey. He or she participates in information gathering discussions with the incumbent or a knowledgeable substitute. If the role reality is no longer attractive, time is saved by redirecting succession planning to a more likely candidate. Succession planning is about ensuring workforce responsiveness for organizational change. (YLB)

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Bottom Up Succession Planning Works Better

Paul Stevens

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Bottom Up Succession Planning Works Better

by Paul Stevens, Founder / Director, The Centre for Worklife Counselling

An HRM researcher or postgraduate student looking up succession planning would be led to believe that it involves identifying and analysing key positions, assessing candidates against job and personal requirements and creating individual development plans for potential successors for more senior responsibilities. Further reading of the literature would encourage creating backup charts, employee profiles and timetables for their promotion.

The problem is that this formula does not bear close scrutiny when considering the nature of organisational life today and the practices required to keep a business viable and staffing resources motivated. It shrieks of outdated top down over-control philosophies with scant attention to the danger that if you do not find out the real, rather than the assumed, career expectations of staff you may not have a reliable succession plan. And how will you know those unless you ask them? And ask them again at regular intervals. Just as organisations change, employees also change as they journey through their lives.

The majority of current succession planning practices reflect the viewpoint of only a linear career direction for ambitious people. They are based on the premise that ambitious people have and want only one career direction—an upwardly mobile one. In fact, every employee has a minimum of ten career direction options at any stage of their working life (Figure 1). Our experiences in conducting 100 career and life planning workshops in the past year indicate that only a minority actually want the career action that requires promotion. But their employers may not have learned this unless a comprehensive career planning support program has been implemented.

Employee participation

Once a career option is actioned and time goes by, an employee will reflect on their work and life experiences and find their primary wants have shifted. Most likely, a different next step option will be chosen than the one previously selected. Knowing the direction in which a good performing employee is inclining is critical to achieving succession planning as a workable human resource practice.

And why should a succession scheme be limited to planning replacements for higher positions? The need for a more career resilient workforce today means that employees must initiate career changes often through lateral job moves within the same employment environment, seek new learning and extended competencies by changing work speciality streams and thereby enhancing their employability.

Knowing the direction in which a good performing employee is inclining is critical to achieving succession planning as a workable human resource practice.

When employees are stimulated to submit their short- and long-term goals in Career Action Step Proposals (Figure 2) management has a better idea of who wants what. The top down only system conjectures at the career direction preferences of the individual. These can often be

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Details of our personal career coach eLearning and eBook system may be found at: http://www.careermastery.com

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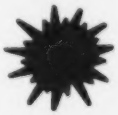
Figure 1 — Ten Career Action Options

Option		Involves
1. **Remain in Current Role** No content change		Recognition that your current role provides you with your desired level of challenge and development at the moment
2. **Enrichment** Develop current job		Considering what job tasks you wish to do more and negotiating with others to take over those which no longer motivate you
3. **Vertical** Seek promotion		Considering what would be the real gain for you in seeking increased responsibilities
4. **Exploration** Test out options		Seeking project work or deputising in another job function to test out how you like it
5. **Lateral** Sideways move		Moving to a similar level of job task difficulty but with different job content
6. **Realignment** Moving down		Downshifting to less responsibility for a short- or long-term period
7. **Relocation** Change business unit		Deciding that work of a nature different from your current business unit is more appropriate for your career future
8. **Redirection** Change career field		Changing the career stream or field of work with your current employer
9. **Proposal** Create new job		Submitting a proposal for creating a new job which would meet the needs of your employer and you
10. **External** Change employer		Deciding that work of a nature different from your current employer is more appropriate for your career future

wrong, discovered only when the time comes to act on job succession moves. By assisting employees to decide on and how to communicate their career direction support needs—what they seek and why they believe they merit it—the hazards of succession planning are substantially reduced.

Employees are realistic about the tenuous nature of their continued employment. The recession years taught this lesson. More employees now accept that career protection and increased employability can only be done by themselves. As a consequence, they are eager learners of personal career management practices. They are responsible for initiating requests and need to be skilled in presenting and negotiating their case.

Career self-resilience

This form of career self-resilience will not be achieved without workforce education in how to do it. Career self-resilience education requires skilled facilitation by trained career support practitioners.

With skilled facilitation, each employee selects and assembles data about: their preferred skills; their career values; their primary wants at the current stage of their career and life; an appraisal of their career action constraints—their belief system; their motivated interests; and concludes by documenting their desired new learning. This is the minimum database for realistic career action planning and their input into a succession plan program.

Employees learn career management skills by participating in workshops and by accessing structured career planning workbooks, employer-sponsored career self-help libraries or comprehensive computer-based career guidance systems (CBCGS) software, such as DISCOVER, Career Builder or SIGI PLUS. There are now systems, such as Worklife's *CareerMastery®*, for delivery direct to employees at their workstations via in-company intranet. Further education comes through career coaching discussions with their manager, mentor or HRM staff designated as their career helper.

Once employees' employability confidence and personal career management expertise have been increased, they are less apprehensive about future organisational change. They feel more secure because they have compiled data about themselves which could be used to identify a set of work tasks in any reasonable amount of work organisation change which could be forthcoming.

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Succession grids, not charts

Succession planning should resemble more a grid-like patterning than a traditional organisation chart. Here, possible successors can be plotted for job content moves that are upwards, sideways or downwards (often a good direction for entry to a new career stream, a new area of expertise growth).

Focusing on replacing incumbents in positions as they exist today is based on the premise that the organisation will clone what is currently wanted for next month, next year, even the next decade. This approach fails to recognise the rate of change—and its turbulent nature—occurring in the economic and social environment in which organisations are operating. Restructuring has become a way of organisational life as the ebb and flow of business needs and altered strategies recur.

We now have multi-task roles rather than jobs when we go to work.

The assessment of a person's match with their employer should look beyond the position occupied today. The organisation's requirements need to be clarified in terms of competencies, roles, culture and technology. Then, in turn, facilities are required for employees to self-assess whether they are motivated and compatible with these requirements. Knowledge and skill to do a job well are not sufficient. Motivation and compatible values and purposes are also required. We now have multi-task roles rather than jobs when we go to work.

Figure 2 — Career Action Step Proposal

Short-Term Goal Proposal

What?

Where?

When?

Performance Improvement:

List your support needs and proposed actions

Professional Development Plan:

What you believe you should undertake in priority sequence

Self-Development Plan:

Your personal actions relating to supporting your career action step

Current Position Enrichment Plan:

How your current job may be enhanced to increase your satisfaction

Measures of Success:

How you will know when you have achieved your short-term goal

The learning journey

Every designated successor would benefit from a learning journey. This means arranging for the candidate to participate in information gathering discussions with the current occupant of the targeted role or a person aware of the nature of work change ahead. This learning journey is a propitious strategy helping both parties by sharing the realities of the work situation rather than career plans being based solely on the publicised descriptions of jobs. A period of intermittent job shadowing could also be scheduled. If the role reality is no longer attractive to the candidate, time is saved by redirecting the succession planning to a more likely candidate. For this to function, succession planning is an open system, not one where the contents are locked in a cupboard by a senior executive.

Managers need to learn about the talent and career action intentions of employees outside their area of accountabilities

Secrecy features in too many succession planning systems. A judgement is made by a senior person and a name entered on a succession chart. Rarely is the individual consulted or informed.

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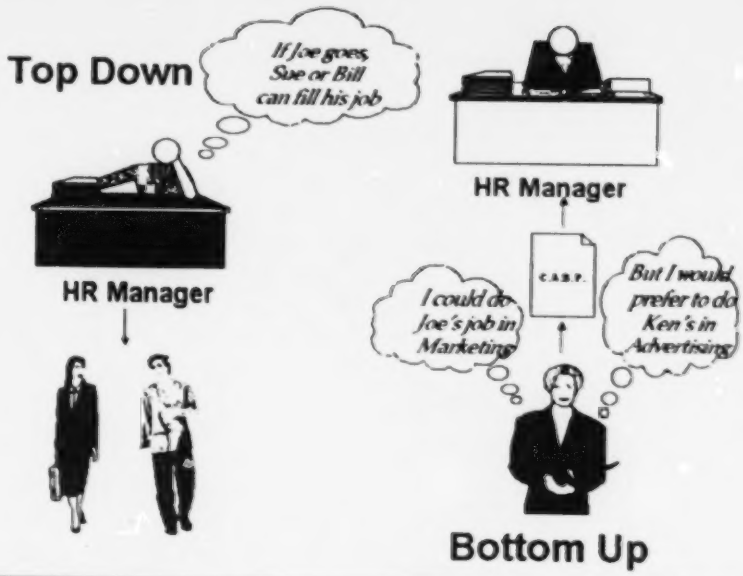
Or asked whether it is what they want. Consider the chart in Figure 3.

Workforce responsiveness

What succession planning is really about is ensuring teams of people are in readiness for contingencies, organisational expansion or contraction, for entering new markets, for handling changes in the nature of technology with which the business operates.

A career resilient workforce will adapt readily to changes in structure, command relationships and objectives. To achieve this resiliency, employees need to be educated in the revised definitions of career management and skilled in self-reliant practices in their own career development. This requires commitment to establishing what is the vision of the organisation and communicating it to staff. It requires courage to invite employees to learning events which assist them to review their worklife and plan, on time horizons no further ahead than two years, the type of roles they as individuals want and can show evidence that they merit such appointments.

Figure 3 — Top Down / Bottom Up


Top Down
If Joe goes, Sue or Bill can fill his job
HR Manager
HR Manager
C.A.R.P.
I could do Joe's job in Marketing
But I would prefer to do Ken's in Advertising
Bottom Up

The new reality

Succession planning in action is offering a new role to an employee who you know can do two-thirds of the task requirements, as it is naive to expect sustainable high performance if the person knows how to do it all. With no room for new learning, there is self-limiting motivation. Succession planning as a process is holistic in nature. It embraces career development skills building and life management planning for individuals while at the same time linking into the employer's overall business planning practices.

Managers need to learn about the talent and career action intentions of employees outside their area of accountabilities before a total company-wide grid-like succession scheme can be effective. There should be more than one party inputting the data on which effective succession planning functions. Limiting succession judgement to a top down secretive process reduces rather than enhances the insurance for the ongoing life of the organisation.

This article is published in the interests of promoting best practice in the provision of support to adults in their career management and life transitions and to enhance their contributions to those who employ them.

Other monographs in this series:

- What Works and What Doesn't in Career Development Programs
- The Worklife Methodology: A Framework for Career Transition Making
- Why Career Planning Can't Be Hurried
- Gaining Commitment to Change through Career Coaching
- Strategies for Electronic Career Support to Employees

WORKLIFE®

The Centre for Worklife Counselling

Paul Stevens, Founder/Director

Tel: (02) 9968 1588 Fax: (02) 9968 1655

Web Site: http://www.worklife.com.au

Email: worklife@ozemail.com.au

PO Box 407, Spit Junction NSW 2088, Australia

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